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XIII

CEREMONIES OF MOURNING

764 765 BEFORE commencing a full account of mortuary ceremonies it will be as well to anticipate by a summary to which the reader may turn back for reference in the course of a long and perhaps bewildering description.

(1) First comes the ceremonies of actual burial, which are followed by the widow's seclusion (pp. 210 ff.; 215 ff.).

(2) The widow emerges from her seclusion and assumes the jacket which is the special sign of mourning (pp. 218 ff.).

(3) The widow discards her mourning jacket, and the other mourners give up the voluntary tabus they have undergone (pp. 224 ff.). After a protracted general tabu on the food supplies, there follows,

(4) An important ceremonial feast and dance, accompanied among the northern tribes by a dramatic performance.

(5) The last of the mortuary ceremonies is the ritual disposal of the paraphernalia of this dance and drama (p. 253).

These five stages or landmarks may be separated from one another by intervals of many months. In the course of the present chapter and the next, continual reference will be made to them in order to keep the sequence of events clearly before the reader. The fourth and fifth stages will be dealt with under Dance and Drama, Chapter XIV.

Death and Burial

763 When death occurs in an Orokaiva village the women burst into loud lamentations, and rush to the nearest swamp to bedaub themselves with mud. Sometimes they mistake coma for death, and the dead man awakes in the midst of the lamentations. Sometimes—one might say usually—they begin wailing as soon as they are convinced that the patient is sinking and death is not far off.

I well remember such a scene about a dying infant. The poor child—if it retained consciousness enough to care—might well have been annoyed by a deafening clamour of

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grief, and its last moments were no doubt rendered fewer and more uncomfortable by the attentions of its relatives. 763

When the victim of this solicitude is finally dead, he is stretched out on his back. His face is painted and his head decorated with ornaments and a feather head-dress. Some of these will be buried with him; but his children will remove and keep the more valuable. The corpse of a man is entirely naked; that of a woman wears a *bo*. 764

If the deceased be a man of any importance, his body is laid out on a sloping platform (*babari*) in the village. It is made of logs set at an angle of about 20 degrees, and the corpse is laid upon it feet downwards and with arms outstretched. This *babari* is said to be meant for the convenience of the mourners who wish to embrace the corpse. [417]

The posthumous honour of a *babari* is denied to a woman for a curious reason which I have heard several times repeated. Women are too fond of *bivije* or adulterous intercourse, and are therefore undeserving of the dignity of an elevated position. They are laid on a mat on the ground, and the only real regret for them is said to be on the part of those who have enjoyed their favours. And since these latter are ashamed to weep for fear of betraying themselves, the woman goes unwept and unhonoured to her grave. This explanation, needless to say, was derived from male informants, and, in point of fact, the demonstrations of grief at a woman's death are hardly less extravagant than at a man's. 764 562

The mourners flock in from all villages in the neighbourhood, pausing on the way to smear themselves with mud, *pusu* (from which they get the name of *pusu-embo* or 'muddy men'). They desert their gardens or whatever work they have in hand at the sound of the *hui*, which repeatedly gives a very long-drawn note as a signal of death. Their attendance is not entirely obligatory, but it is regarded as a matter of decency to attend the funeral of a neighbour: and the relatives of the deceased will be offended if there is not a large muster. It is to be suspected, moreover, that the mourners derive some satisfaction from the very exuberant way they have of showing their grief, and, in the case of the 764 [202] [576] 764 152

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construction on the matter and say that the native must suppose the *asisi* of the living man to leave his body at death and survive in the form of a *sovai*. But, unfortunately, I have never heard such an interpretation from a native, nor do I feel confident that his conception of an *asisi* would allow of it. Save for one or two fanciful explanations which I have heard from isolated witnesses and which will be mentioned presently, we must allow that the native simply takes the transition for granted, as he does so many other abstruse happenings.

On cessation of breathing (*beb*)—about which the native holds no psychic theory—the man is dead, and his *sovai* is hovering somewhere in the environs of the village. It is interesting to note that in native belief a man may die and come to life again. Upon the appearance of coma, which is interpreted as death, the friends and relatives set up a very noisy lamentation. The *sovai* is lurking on the outskirts of the village, but may be so affected by compassion as to return; whereupon the corpse is reanimated. In such a case I have heard the *sovai* spoken of as *sovai isapo*, 'the small *sovai*', but no explanation was offered of how it departed and returned.

To show how singularly confused and, in a sense, ill-made are the beliefs regarding the transition from living man to *sovai*, I quote a case which, despite its rather fabulous complexion, purports, nevertheless, to be true. A man named Hosisi (an exceptionally good informant who told me this story himself) was going to fish in the river. Meanwhile a very old man named Divinopa lay sick in the village. On the way Hosisi saw a cuscus which he immediately realized was the *sovai* of Divinopa, recognizing it, as he explained, by the whiteness of its fur which so resembled the white hair of the old man. Hosisi called the latter's son to his assistance, and together they succeeded in catching the cuscus. They addressed it affectionately as 'grandfather' or 'old man', and took it with them to the village, where they induced it to eat for the next two days. Meanwhile they watched Divinopa, feeling that the appearance of the *sovai* cuscus was a sign that his end was close at hand. On the